

## HAVE CHRISTIANS LOST THE CULTURE-WAR?

John Barber

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Headline: April 27, 2009 “Same-sex couples in Iowa began filing marriage license applications Monday after a state Supreme Court ruling legalizing gay unions took effect and the first legal gay weddings took place shortly afterward.” If ten years ago you had told me that Iowa, the heartland of America, fly-over country, would legalize gay marriage, I would have told you that you are very mistaken. And yet, it’s happened. In fact, Iowa now becomes the 4<sup>th</sup> state to legalize gay marriages.

Oh, but there’s more. Thirty-six years after Roe, abortion has not been turned back. A federal judge has ruled that 17-year-olds will be able to buy the “morning-after” pill without a doctor’s prescription. The Obama administration is loosening restrictions on stem-cell research. And we’re now witnessing an unprecedented expansion of the role and reach of government into our lives. And there’s more to come.

So dire do things appear that in his farewell speech to the Focus on the Family staff, Dr. James Dobson, seemed to concede defeat for the conservative, Christian cause. “We are awash in evil and the battle is still to be waged. We are right now in the most discouraging period of that long conflict. Humanly speaking, we can say we have lost all those battles.”

Perhaps you’re feeling the same way. So my question tonight is this. “Have Christians lost the culture-war?” Have we, as Dobson suggests, “Lost all those battles?” I want to suggest we have not. And what I’d like to do is that rather than look at the issue according to a “win/loss” column, I want us to reassess our progress through the “spectacles” of theology. By

reassessing what we've accomplished to this point theologically we will see that more has been accomplished than many people think. So how do we assess our progress theologically?

I'd like to suggest that we do so according to God's work in redemptive history. Redemptive history is a big term for some. Simply put, redemptive history describes all of God's redeeming activity from the time of the creation to the end of the present age. It includes everything that happens, the good and the bad. What else redemptive history assumes is that all that happens on the world stage, good and bad, serves the higher goal of God's redeeming purposes for His Church.

What this means, and this is especially the case with respect to the so-called bad things that happen, is that there are no accidents, sad twists of fate, or events that catch God napping. Rather, redemptive history teaches us that God planned or permitted everything that happens in advance and is now using all of it to advance his redemptive ends. Paul has this very idea in mind when he writes in Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Now practically speaking what does this mean with respect to our labor in the culture-war? It means that God always wins. Dr. John Frame at RTS Orlando, Florida, has captured this idea in a statement. "God never fails to accomplish what he sets out to do. Creatures may oppose him...but they cannot prevail. For his own reasons, he has chosen to delay the fulfillment of his intentions for the end of history, and to bring about those intentions through a complicated historical sequence of events. In that sequence, his purposes appear sometimes to suffer defeat, sometimes to achieve victory. But...each apparent defeat actually makes his eventual victory all the more glorious."

What Frame is saying is this: God has a long-range plan. He achieves his plan through a complicated series of historical events. In fact they're so complicated that some events appear to signal defeat for God's purposes while other events appear to achieve victory. But what appears to be a defeat is really a victory because God works in the supposed defeat to bring about his ultimate victory.

The chief example of this is, of course, the cross of Jesus. When the disciples of Jesus met him on the road to Emmaus, they had assumed that the cross indicated the defeat of Christ. The disciples said to him, "We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Jesus, knowing that God uses apparent defeat to achieve his ultimate victory, responds, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" So what appeared to be defeat was really a great victory. Applied to our custody of culture, though it may appear that Satan and his evil minions are gaining the upper hand on the world-stage, God is in control, using all things together to serve His eternal ends. Despite the ups and downs of our cultural labor together, God's sovereignty assures us that the Church is on the winning side of history.

There's another way to think about what I'm saying. When addressing redemptive history, Classic Protestant theology distinguishes between God's revealed will and his secret will. The revealed will of God is very simple. It is what God has revealed to us by way of precept, namely the Law and the gospel. God's revealed will says, "Here's what you're supposed to do, now do it. Here's what you're not supposed to do, so don't do it." Now let's say that God gave us a cultural mandate and all that we had to go on was his revealed will. This would mean that our stewardship of culture ought to articulate the meaning of God's immutable standards for the times in which we live. Think through political and cultural Christian activism over the past

thirty years in America and you will notice great concentration on promoting legislation at both the local and federal levels that has to do with God's revealed will, his precepts. Problematically, to the degree that the process has not moved along as some had hoped, fatigue has set in.

But then there's the secret will of God. God's secret will refers to all those things God planned to do before the foundations of the world but isn't telling anyone. An example of God's secret will is his eternal decrees respecting whom he plans to call unto himself in salvation. Romans 9:18 records, "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." Now obviously no one knows to whom God plans to show saving mercy. If we knew this, we would go to their door and invite them to church. Another example of God's secret will is his purposes among the Kings of the world. I would point you to Daniel 4, where Nebuchadnezzar recognizes God's judgment in his life as a decree ministered by angels and is according to God's own prerogative.

God's secret will also involves human suffering. When Martin Luther's daughter, Magdalena was 14, she became very ill and lay dying. Luther prayed, "O God, I love her so, but nevertheless, Thy will be done." Then, he turned to his daughter, and said, "Magdalena, would you rather be with me, or would you rather go and be with your Father in heaven?" And the girl said, "Father, as God wills." Luther held her in his arms as she passed away. And as they laid her to rest, he said, "Oh my dear Magdelenachen, you will rise and shine like the stars in the sun. How strange and sorrowful and yet to know that all is at peace, that all is well."

Now what did Luther know? That God, according to his secret will, decides the span of our lives. So in the face of his dear daughter's death, he said, "Thy will be done." Together what God's revealed and secret wills tell us that the world is a place where good and evil, sin and

salvation, blessing and suffering co-exist. And that God is in charge over all of it, like intricate puzzle pieces putting them all together to reach his final goals.

There is import in these truths for how we ought to calculate our progress in the great cultural battles of the day. If God's activities in the creation were limited to His revealed will, his precepts as set forth in the Bible, we could say that the measure of successful cultural activism is the numbers of people who obey Scripture, either from their hearts, or outwardly, at the very least. But since God also accomplishes His will on earth by His secret will—His decisions and actions that serve the ultimate working out of His intentions in history—this sets up whole new criteria for us to weigh the success of our dominion activity.

What this criterion tells us is that upward trends in society are insufficient to gauge our progress in the cultural mandate. Rather, the gauging of our progress must also reflect trust in what God is accomplishing via his secret will, or else our ministry and the appraisal of it, will be incomplete. And it must be this way because we're not called to be ambassadors of Christ's revealed will. We're called to be ambassadors of Christ, who is Lord of all. Paul writes, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together."

Now perhaps all of this is a bit difficult so let's put this discussion in the context of evangelism. What is successful evangelism? Is it successful only when you share the gospel with someone and that person becomes a Christian? What if no one comes to Christ? Are we to say that we failed? Isaiah preached for nearly fifty years and hardly anyone responded positively. Was he a failure? I think of Bill Bright's helpful definition of successful evangelism. Bright

often said, “Successful evangelism is witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.” Now apply what Bright said in reference to the Great Commission to the cultural mandate, and let’s define the cultural mandate. “Successful Christian activism is laboring in culture in the power of the Holy Spirit and leaving the results to God.” You see, if we looked at evangelism the way some look at the culture-war, we’d look at all the people we’ve witnessed to, and see how few have come to Christ, and [following Dr. Dobson] say, “We are awash in evil and the battle is still to be waged. We are right now in the most discouraging period of that long conflict. Humanly speaking, we can say we have lost all those battles.” But no one who is biblically informed thinks this way regarding evangelism. So we ought not to think this way regarding the cultural mandate.

Well, I know what some are thinking. “John, nice theology, but we want to win! Plus, this is no way to fundraise. You can’t say to supporters, ‘We’re going to fight for right values in the culture, but remember redemptive history, remember the secret will of God.’ No people want results, not theologizing.” But I would respond that to overlook God’s overall plan in history in our cultural activism because the political realities are such that activism can only ever address the concrete realities of politics assumes that our obedience does not need to be bound to the larger STORY of the Christian church. But this is impossible. God is going to work out his will and ways in culture via redemptive history whether or not we’re on board. And if we’re not on board we’ll continue to suffer the slings and arrows of failed expectations.

How can we synchronize our labor together in the cultural mandate with God’s broader program in redemptive history?

First, we need to stop wringing our hands and we need to start seeing our failures as successes. If Dr. Frame is right, and indeed he is, that God is at work even in our failures, then

not only does this change our definition of “success” in the struggle for cultural renewal, but also it tells us that we must remain vigilant in the struggle, for how else will God be at work in our failures unless we’re there to fail?

Yet, within the area of electoral politics especially, most of my comrades appear convinced that the only way to win is for their candidate and the issues they feel passionately about to win. But while, for example, it’s very important to fight homosexual marriage and to get *our* man or woman in office, this is not the whole picture. It may serve God’s overall purpose to use a lost election as a means to serve his omni plan of salvation. In a mysterious way God may have it in His mind to work in the life of a government leader in such a way that it brings about a catastrophic series of events for God’s people.

Do you think that such a thing is impossible? In 2 Kings 20, when Hezekiah contracted a terminal disease he prayed to God to be healed. The Bible says that God heard the King’s prayers, saw his tears, and changed his mind, thus giving the King an additional fifteen years of life. Now that sounds great. The problem is that in that fifteen-year period, Hezekiah went on to father a son named Manasseh. Manasseh became such an evil King that the Lord said, “I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.” Now, are we to suppose that God didn’t know about the coming of Manasseh when he extended Hezekiah’s life? If Hezekiah had died, Manasseh wouldn’t have existed. And God knew all of these ramifications well ahead of time.

Second, we can synchronize our steps of obedience with God’s overarching plan of redemption by not acting so offended in the face of opposition. One of the unfortunate pictures over the last thirty years is that of the red-faced Christian defending conservative values on a cable TV program. Or, there is the believer who becomes indignant when he feels that his rights

have been violated. Recently, I've been receiving emails from organizations decrying the denigration of Christians. These messages, while I agree with their basic content, exhibit a certain air of annoyance at the way Christians are treated. A perfect example is the outrage many Christians have felt over the mistreatment of Miss California on the heels of her answer to a controversial question about gay marriage. Now please don't misunderstand. There's nothing wrong with defending Miss California. It's the "How dare they" attitude, which we Christians are often guilty. It's the sense of insult, effrontery, of dare I say, sometimes outrage at the way in which we are treated and spoken about.

Right now this is the standard reaction of many Christians to discrimination and ill-treatment. It is the attitude beneath our modus operandi in the culture-war. But when you react this way, you practice a deontological view of history. In other words, you react to historical events as though there were no larger scheme, no meta-narrative of history, as theologians like to say; no big picture, which helps us to interpret our sufferings for Christ according to what God is doing in and through them.

How does Jesus say we ought to react to persecution? He says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus is not talking about how things are on earth. He's talking about how things are in the Kingdom of God in relationship to his people on earth. And it's with this kingdom perspective that we're not to be indignant in the face of maltreatment, but are to rejoice.

Now does this mean we roll over and play dead? Not at all! Paul says to "Stand firm against the schemes of the devil." So we are to resist in the evil day. But what is our attitude? Peter writes, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing." Now who has heard any Christian in the media or elsewhere praising God that Miss California was

considered worth of insult? Where's the rejoicing? Where's the "Thank-you God for allowing this woman to be reviled for the name of Christ?" Where do we find this response in our churches today?

Third, we can synchronize our steps of obedience with God's overarching plan of redemption by always bearing in mind what it means to be an ambassador for Christ. Paul writes, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." The role of an ambassador is really two-fold. He's charged with representing the interests of his home nation or kingdom in a foreign land. But he's also under orders to remain keenly interested in the peace and security of the land he labors in. Likewise, the Christian ambassador has two jobs. He's commissioned to represent Christ and His kingdom in the world. But he must also be attentive to the peace and security needs of the world. Thus, the Christian ambassador must be involved in the dialogue over what is best for culture and the broader questions that affect society. But he must always bear in mind that his purpose is never to serve the interests of the world, but only the eternal interests of the higher kingdom he represents. This means that the Christian is not an ambassador for family values, religious liberties, the Framers' understanding of the Constitution of the US, or even America's Christian heritage. The Christian represents Jesus and His kingdom—in the world. His main mission is to see people reconciled to God.

We must always see the cultural mandate, not as an end in and of itself, but as an opportunity for the gospel. The fact is that our obedience to the cultural mandate gets us into places we otherwise would not be. Just think of these issues and places—homosexuality, gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research, the economy, the fine arts, the media, and more—to which we have access, and can use to make Christ and his gospel known. When Paul stood

before Festus he used the opportunity for the gospel. Yes, he appealed to Caesar. But the main reason he went to Rome was not merely to seek his rights, but to preach the gospel there also. Unless we recognize the cultural mandate as a golden opportunity for the Great Commission we will lose kingdom perspective.

A few years ago, I was serving with Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) as a writer. I sat in a 5x6 cubicle eight hours a day. Prior to this, however, I hosted a syndicated radio program which applied the Bible to cultural issues, served as a church planter, and also as an evangelist with Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship. So everything before the CCC experience had me thinking long range, big picture. Well, one day, as I was sitting in my cubicle, I noticed that my ability to think long-range was suffering. “What’s the problem?” I thought to myself. Then it hit me. Sitting in a *physically* constricted space, staring at a computer just eighteen inches from my nose, eight hours a day, was affecting my long range, *spiritual* vision. So, to solve the problem, three to four times a day, I would just get up, walk to the window, and look out at the giant, open field, the tress, the birds circling in the air, and then go back to work. Wouldn’t you know that after a brief period of practicing this simple activity that my long-range, spiritual vision returned?

Here’s the point. Some of us have spent so much time in the trenches of social and political warfare that we’ve lost perspective on the grand narrative of redemption. When you spend most of your time in a trench you don’t have much perspective. You see only as far as the walls of the trench. What I’m encouraging us to do here tonight is to *look out the window*, so we can regain God’s perspective on our cultural task.

Lastly, I think it’s also important that we recognize our successes. The fact is we have won some battles. People who say that thirty years of activism has produced nothing should look

again. Since the late 70s America has witnessed a precipitous rise in Christian radio, television, and mercy ministries, all aimed at affecting culture for Christ. If we think for a second that all of this has been of no effect in combating the flood of hedonism and debauchery in our land we are very wrong. I tremble to think what egregious inroads enemies of the gospel would have made in the hearts and minds of countless Americans, had Christians not stood in the gap to challenge their evil devices.

The media has not been favorable to us, but we sure got their attention. They've been forced to reckon with our message. Some years ago, during an episode of Phil Donahue, Jerry Falwell was a guest along with a woman representing the homosexual/lesbian agenda. Irritated that Donahue was deferring to Falwell too often, she exclaimed, "Why are you allowing this man to set the agenda?" Donahue replied, "Because he is setting the agenda!" Restraining evil by standing in the gap and setting the agenda for the cultural dialogue. Pretty successful, I'd say.

In conclusion, we need to regain a biblical/theological perspective on our cultural work. I have argued many times that the cultural mandate is first and foremost a biblical/theological task, not a political task. What I am stating here tonight, from a biblical/theological perspective, is the uncomfortable idea, for many, that God providentially causes all things to happen in the world (whether first or second cause) because in His wisdom such things serve His eternal plan. Our job is to synchronize our steps of obedience in the culture with this fact. It needs to be imaged in our hearts, minds, political and social strategies, fund-raising, and assessments of our progress.